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## PEDAGOGICAL SCRAP-IRON, OR THE RUMINATIONS OF A NORMAL-SCHOOL VISITOR

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8:15 A. M. RECEPTION ROOM. My purpose in visiting this normal school is chiefly to note modern methods in teaching language. However, I hope I shall see something of the psychology and pedagogy also. How perfectly systematized all details of the day's work seem to be. Absolute discipline evident, yet its machinery wholly out of sight. And how delightful to have an usher thus assigned to help one put in every moment to the best advantage! What shall I visit first?

8:30. CLASSROOM A. *A recitation upon the "subjunctive mode in English."*—This lesson seems to be conducted in a clear-cut, definite way. The students quite glibly give specific forms called for under the name *subjunctive*. They do not, however, as they should if they have mastered the subject, present for consideration abundant citations showing use of the subjunctive in literature. To such use it is now, of course, practically confined, being almost obsolete in popular everyday discourse. I wonder whether these advanced pupils are aware that they are studying a phase of English dead except to the scholar, and that modern grammarians often discard the subjunctive mode entirely. Would they even recognize the "mode" if it should occur in their general reading?

8:45. Not a hint yet to indicate any intelligence upon the part of these embryo teachers as to the practical usefulness or otherwise of the subject they are reciting about. Doubtless they will go out into district schools to waste the time of country pupils with similar unapplied lessons upon this obsolescent phase of English. Ah, the usher comes for me, though I would fain see this ceremony in dead English through its final rites.

8:50. *A psychology class.*—And so these pupils are taught that “concentration of attention upon an act *will result in the act*, even though one make up his mind, that is, even though he will, not to do the deed.” Examples given are, the man who jumps “unwillingly” from a cliff, and in certain cases the hypnotized person. This is “developed” from a bright girl whose modern English is guiltless both of subjunctives and of certain other requirements of the grammar books. But what a pity to leave this as final impression, unrelieved by the more comprehensive truths (1) that no person will ever commit a crime who firmly and constantly believes that he will not, and (2) that no persons are hypnotized except when either voluntarily, passively, or expectantly giving up their own self-control. Here lay ready at hand the practical applied lesson of self-control, self-direction, and persistency of moral attitude, which should have made this recitation rich in ethical culture. I am sorry that the bell for chapel rang so soon. Even if the moral application be presented tomorrow—as seems, however, doubtful from the trend of today’s treatment—the postponed application cannot then be driven home with full force. Correct *de facto*, the lesson is incorrect *de jure*, except as reinforced by the larger psychological truth that man can and must *control his attention*. May Providence grant that no morbid weakling in this class ever use this recitation hour as scapegoat for future misdeeds!

9:30. *An eighth- and ninth-grade grammar class, analyzing and parsing Gray’s “Elegy in a Country Churchyard.”*—Either I have had trouble in hearing these pupils, or else I have been in a brown study, for since I sat here they have analyzed the following:

Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife,  
Their sober wishes never learn’d to stray;  
Along the cool sequestered vale of life  
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Yet e’en these bones from insult to protect  
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,  
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck’d,  
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Their name, their years, spelt by the unletter'd Muse,  
The place of fame and elegy supply:  
And many a holy text around she strews,  
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

I wish I had noted whether they disposed of "far" correctly. I recall what nonsense those two first lines used to make in my own mind because I construed "far" with "stray." I must at least be sure how they explain ungrammatical "teach." For here is a nugget of grammatical gold, an actual "disagreement" of verb and subject for the sake of rhythm! Will they seize the gold, I wonder, or will they go on picking up only worthless scrap-iron—because their eyes have been trained to recognize only the latter? Ah! it seems that neither this long-experimented-upon class nor their "critic teachers" have even perceived the ungrammatical expression. Not that I should care personally to have them do so. Love of the beautiful forbid! But this school claims to be teaching these pupils grammar; and if they do know even a little grammar they should surely demand concord between subject and verb, and not parse "agreement" where none exists. Even thus is many a child misled!

Clearly this is a case in absolute proof that study of grammar does not give grammatical perception. Now they go on again, parsing, inflecting, and construing each word, picking up busily the grammatical scrap-iron, and all oblivious of the mine of literary treasure over which they heedlessly tread. Very suavely I ask in a whisper of the "critic teacher," or "model teacher," or whatsoever her title may be, "How did the pupils construe 'to protect'?" "What did they make it modify?" "'To protect,'" she informs me gravely, "has merely the adverbial relation, and does not modify anything." My surprise is so ill-concealed that she hastens to assure me, "The text we use indorses such use of the infinitive," and she points out the category which she has thus interpreted. I again cautiously press the inquiry, "But what does 'to protect' modify?" Quickly perceiving the true logical relation, she now answers me correctly. But is this a normal-school class in ninth-grade grammar?

Rather shamefacedly, because of my momentary inattention,

I ask, "Will you permit your pupils to read those two last lines as if they were prose instead of verse, changing any incorrect form?" But this, it seems, is a new and impossible task. Answers show conclusively that the thought in these stanzas is not comprehended, and that Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" would probably have been better material for use. Finally, however, one little girl offers the needful "teaches," to our general relief. I do not venture to ask what is meant by "the unletter'd Muse," for I suspect—but there comes that most attentive usher. Never was there school where visitor's wishes received more courteous and watchful respect. However, I am glad to go; but I do wonder how much longer Gray's beautiful "Elegy" will be prostituted to these unseemly ends. Ah, yes, "Jabberwocky" would be delightful material for analysis and parsing. Thus it goes:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jujub bird, and shun  
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:  
Long time the manxome foe he sought—  
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,  
And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,  
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,  
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,  
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through  
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!  
He left it dead, and with its head  
He went galumphing back.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?  
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!  
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"  
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
 Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
 All mimsy were the borogoves,  
 And the mome raths outgrabe.

This nonsense lyric is ideal material for the offices of the zealous diagrammer. In my mind's eye I behold it beautifully displayed upon the school blackboard in symmetrical sausage-links. Someone, I recall, became quite enthusiastic over the word "chortled." Since we need a single word to express the idea of talking nonsense, I believe "chortled" would fill a useful place. To my notion, these children have been "chortling."

10:00. *A sixth-grade class in language.*—These appear like bright pupils, and the teacher's every word and look denote poise and power. I shall settle down for a half-hour of solid comfort. I note a small dictionary on each desk, but no other textbook. The teacher is reading aloud—can I believe my ears?—Lowell's "Vision of Sir Launfal"! Apparently this is a class in ear-mindedness. But surely this is no suitable text for such purpose. For even if they had the text before their eyes, sixth-year children could not instantly comprehend the bare thought, to say nothing of appreciating this poem in its delicate imagery and its numerous contrasted pictures.

The teacher reads:

The drawbridge dropped with a surly clang,  
 And through the dark arch a charger sprang.

"What is a charger?" Recourse is instantly had by all to the dictionaries, and an acceptable definition is presently deduced. But if the next line had been read, either by pupils or by teacher,

Bearing Sir Launfal, the maiden knight,

time need not thus have been wasted by a score of children in looking up the word "charger." This is an extreme example of inexcusably bad method directly in opposition to the teachings of that wise man, Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. Several more lines are read by the teacher rapidly and well, with two or three pauses for the direction, "*Now make the picture;*" and so this absurd mixture of supposititious visualization and ear-training goes on, because, forsooth, it is supposed to be "pedagogic" and

“psychologic.” Ah, welcome is the usher! I could almost shed tears over this exercise. A brilliant teacher, an able class, a noble poem—but the combination a mere misfit. Oh, pedagogy, what crimes are committed in thy name!

10:30. *A fourth-year class in language.*—Another capable and charming teacher. The general subject is the King Arthur myths, and attention today centers upon the adventures of the fair-handed Geraint which result in his being knighted by Lancelot. A quick review is given yesterday’s lesson for the purpose—of all things unsuitable!—of emphasizing the paragraphs it contained with the topic of each. Here is college composition work babyfied with a vengeance. Paragraphing for infants, I perceive, is one of our newest fads, and this although the subject is purely one of logic and of chief import to the maker of literature, not to the reader thereof. For the vast majority of pupils in the public-school grades who will never reach the high school this is about as complete a waste of time as could well be devised; and for the advanced student of logical mind, who has begun writing in earnest, the subject is one which will well-nigh take care of itself, since it is largely mechanical. Thus are these babes and sucklings made to begin at the wrong end of literature, the critical end. No surer way could be taken to prevent their becoming creative. Was there ever another school system, I wonder, so coarsely spongy as our own, soaking up thus as it does every device exploited by anybody and everybody in the name of education, and this, whether it be meat for man, or milk for babes, or wine for tippling youth?

At all events, this teacher reads these dear old myths delightfully and they are suited in grade to those who listen. However, the quaint diction somewhat lessens their value as material for training in ear-mindedness. Moreover, ear-mindedness comes more by nature than by acquirement, and most of these pupils are now chiefly eye-minded. These, at least, should be allowed to have the text in their hands; and, for that matter, so should all who prefer. Isn’t it odd that our school system should take its pupils wholly ear-minded at entrance, neglect to avail itself of that ear-mindedness for several years when it would be of most

use in acquiring a wide vocabulary, and then, after having inculcated a pretty general eye-mindedness, should in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades waste precious hours in attempting to undo what it has labored so hard to accomplish? Truly, wonders will never cease—wonders of folly, at least!

The only redeeming feature in this "recitation" is the admirable reading of the teacher. Every word falls like a bell-note, sweet, clear, and appropriate. The pupils seem to follow Frost's easy version with little need of explanation. They evidently enjoy the recital and are interested in the story. Ah, now she is through with the reading for today. She begins to discuss—the story? Alas, no; the paragraphs they shall make in their written work from the portion of the story which has just been read aloud. Heavens! I am humiliated to the depths of shame for my own country's school system. So this specious display of epic literature was for no good end in itself after all, but merely a thing whereon to hang written memory tests and drills in the logic of paragraphing; and this memory test is made to depend also upon the ear-mindedness of each child! Thus is the pure joy in beautiful literature for its own sake buried in the hearts of these poor children under an Egyptian pyramid of anxious care. This is cruelty to human animals. I cannot endure listening longer, and I shall not await the arrival of my usher.

10:50. Another grammar class, and the same teacher as in class number one. I shall have only ten minutes here as it is almost time for the intermission. Ah, what does that girl say?

. . . . And over the breast  
Of the glimmering lake he spread  
A coat of mail, that it need not fear  
The downward point of many a spear  
That he hung on its margin, far and near,  
Where a rock would rear its head.

"*Need* is a form in which the *s* of the third person singular is omitted. It is in the indicative mode," and so forth. Well, well, well! and was it in this room an hour ago that this teacher taught English subjunctives? I have seldom seen so striking a proof that the study of mere grammar does not develop the



grammatical sense. Here is a subjunctive beyond doubt, if we ever have one, yet it is not even recognized as such by the class nor by the teacher, although the latter is indeed author of the textbook in his own hand. How long, I wonder, will grammar be called a "practical" study? For my part, I am thoroughly delighted over the blunder. It merely proves what all great scholars claim, that grammar is largely a waste of time with pupils below high-school grade. This teacher is certainly a more than average grammarian, but he evidently has not the grammatical nose, which scents out as if by instinct the delicate flavor of the subjunctive. And what of it? Neither have all except one or two persons out of every thousand; and, hence, what need to teach subjunctives at all, except in high-school or college classes? Well, it is really delightful to have one's pet theories thus emphatically confirmed!

11:40. *A class in literature.*—Here I am again in the same room as at first. And so Lowell's "Commemoration Ode" is the literary nutriment adjudged suitable for these students, who seem so mature that I wondered just what "first year" means, as applied to them.

12:10. I have listened in considerable uneasiness while these pupils—mostly girls, of course, for all sensible boys save one have fled the precincts long ago—while these girls have recited *at* the greater part of this heavy poem. We have suffered together, they in striving to render orally the difficult constructions and involved thought, which they apparently do not quite comprehend nor certainly at all enjoy, and I in beholding their evident physical discomfort and nervous strain. Laboring to recall the words, they can hardly enjoy their own rendition. Their emphasis and pronunciation have frequently been faulty. Surely, every teacher of literature should first of all be an accomplished reader, who through the beautiful rendering of noble passages leads her pupils to the same attainment. Another dreary misfit! And how almost pessimistic it makes one feel! Well, I share the pupils' distaste. For this is a heavy poem of occasion, very uneven as to the beauty of its various portions, and best suited to the mature intellect. As a whole, it is ill chosen for adoles-

cents. Is this in fact a class doing high-school work, or is it a "normal" class proper? If it be the latter, these pupils should rather be memorizing and comparing childish stories and merry jingles, and preparing their own collections of the same for future use when some of them will be miles from a good library. They should be cultivating their latent power of selection, through attempting to estimate the practical schoolroom value of numerous bits of choice verse culled from the fair field of poesy from Spenser down to Kipling. Could these sober-looking students enjoy Edward Lear and William Brighty Rands, I wonder, after the long focusing of their mental vision upon a commemoration ode? Truly it seems not likely, and they are losers in the training which would best have fitted them for their future work. How I wish I might ask each one to recite some short fairy tale such as she would choose in a primary grade to foster the ear-mindedness so potent in learning to understand and to speak even one's own language; or to give an anecdote suited to teach indirectly lessons of self-control or of presence of mind; or to render several bits of good magazine verse or of jolly folklore, which should tend to develop vocabulary; or to explain to me her individual test as to what one shall or shall not regard as literature; or to explain how she would seek to stimulate in her pupils a love for the beautiful in their own daily speech. But all this practical sort of thing would be unknown ground, I fear, to students who are drilled chiefly upon obsolescent English subjunctives, and who are taught that *shall* as used in the passage "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" expresses *determination* on the part of the speaker. However, were I but dictator, my "Thus shalt thou do" should indeed express an unchangeable determination that a new and rational sort of language teaching must come into being in American schools.

For far better might children be turned out to pasture than exposed unprotected to the graduated tortures which I have this day beheld. Normal? No! *abnormal* from beginning to end. And this so-called "normal" system can never be aught but abnormal, so long as it creates a false condition and then meets that

condition with theoretical remedies. This exploiting of "model" departments sequestered far from the madding grade's noble strife is in itself a fallacious presumption. For these classes of English-speaking pupils, who have been brought largely from homes of culture, in no wise correspond to the polyglot groups of children forming public-school grades. Hence, even if the work I have seen today had been suited to its end, it would nevertheless still be unsuited to the unsifted collections of "graded" human units in our every public-school building.

Why not abolish these specious "model" departments which serve in effect to instil in hundreds of thousands of pupil-teachers a false conception as to fact and, hence, false ideals and false aims? Indeed, the ablest teacher I have met while visiting three normal schools has assured me that the normal school is not run for the children's good, but for that of the pupil-teachers! "But it would not do to say that publicly," he hastened to add in apology, upon my look of incredulous disapprobation. But why not, at the very least, let these pupil-teachers go out as assistants into congested school buildings, where they will face actual conditions and living problems? And why not let them help make *model schools* of these as far as possible in a quasi-application of the judicious "Batavia" system? The overcrowding of primary grades is the single greatest evil in the schools of America today; but a large body of normal-school assistants giving class or individual instruction even for an hour or two daily in these primary grades would insure a marvelous improvement all along the school line. Should this be done, no longer would there be as now a doubtful excuse for the existence of the American normal school.

This school, I remind myself, is no second-rate institution. On the contrary, it is doubtless one of the best in America. I shall not venture, I believe, to visit others less high in public esteem, lest I again behold these and similar follies, such as I fain would have become forgotten even by my subconscious self. Truly our great American school system is topheavy with a hydrocephalus which only heroic surgery can possibly relieve.

And what if the patient die under the knife? Well, better death than chronic disease, a bedridden patient, and final atrophy.

"Normal" lines and methods, being interpreted, seems to mean the magnification of means rather than ends, through over-elaboration of specific details supposedly in accord with the dictates of pedagogics and of psychology. A *little* psychology has indeed proved a dangerous thing for thousands of American teachers. I have visited today chiefly classes in English because I hold that a generous command over one's vernacular is the main gift which education can confer upon man; but all inspiration and original genius must evaporate from dead-English classes such as I have seen.

However, not this normal school alone, which is one of the best of its kind, but our entire educational system, whether within or without normal-school walls, should be cited to appear at the bar of American public common-sense, and there, pleading guilty to much ignorant evil-doing, it should give pledge for thorough reformation. Well, peace to these ashes! and may the phoenix of a New Education yet arise therefrom!